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How do I create my living theory of accountability as a lecturer in teacher education?

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Abstract

In this paper I outline my thinking to date as I pursue my doctoral studies. I describe the context within which I work and the reasons for my research and I offer an account of my reflections on how and why I have come to the position where I feel the need to and the rightness of theorising and conceptualising my practice as a Senior Lecturer in Education. I describe how I have, through an MA dissertation (Renowden, 2006), and will, through a PhD thesis, offer an account of my living theories of practice as I explain how and why I hold myself accountable for my working life. I will show how, through these acts of accountability, and others, (see [video](#)) I am coming to create my living educational theories of practice and work towards the development of an epistemology of accountability.

Keywords: Accountability; epistemology; living theory.

Contexts of my work and my research issue

I am a full-time Senior Lecturer in Education working with undergraduate and postgraduate student teachers. I am also involved in developing and teaching on Masters programmes for teachers. As well as teaching, I mentor students in school and I have a pastoral role as Year 1 co-ordinator. Alongside this work I am currently at the end of my second year of study for a PhD with the University of Newcastle. I have worked in Higher Education since January 2004 after a career in primary teaching. This transition into the Academy has been the catalyst for initiating my research programme, in the sense that the teaching and learning context within which I locate my practice has changed, as I have moved from a mainstream primary context into a higher education context. Alongside this my understandings of the nature of that practice have also changed, as I now explain.

My research issue

As a primary practitioner and senior manager I was secure in my understanding of the nature of teaching and learning processes in the primary classroom. I was judged positively by Ofsted, colleagues, parents and children and I felt that I was effective in my work. I was positioned, and positioned myself, as an experienced practitioner. On my move to St Mary's University College as a Senior Lecturer in teacher education I was required to teach groups of students of 80–120 students, all of who positioned me as an expert who would be able to tell them how to teach. This description of the situation sounds simplistic but it reflects fairly well the way students approached my lecture sessions. This need for useful information always seemed to be top of their list of requirements. Fromm (1979) would consider them to be in a *having* mode rather than a *being* mode. I was also working alongside the Standards for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) which are communicated as competencies, set out in a series of tick boxes, which also worked towards the idea of there being a body of propositional knowledge about teaching that I could hand over to students in an unproblematic way. I prepared my sessions initially in a rather didactic and transmissive way, using presentations that did not allow for much interaction between the students and myself. I did not have either the confidence or see the need to engage with the students in a way that required them to engage critically in their own learning. I had become involved in what Freire (1972) had called *banking education*, where I was leaving deposits of knowledge in the *educate*.

I quickly realised, however, that the values and beliefs I held around education were not being lived out in my practice (Whitehead, 1989). For the first time in my working life I became uneasy about the way I was teaching. I began to experience myself as a *living contradiction* (ibid.), and I began to appreciate the need to engage with the questions "What is my practice?" and "How do I understand my practice?" This led me to new understandings about the ontological, epistemological and methodological underpinnings of my research.

Ontological, epistemological and methodological underpinnings of my research

The way I have conducted this research programme and continue to research has become an important articulation about what I value and about what has emerged as I engage in dialogue with colleagues at the University College. The methodology I have chosen for this research enables me to live out my values as I fully engage with my own learning and seek to improve what I do. Lakatos (1973, as cited in Feyerabend, 1975) puts forward the idea that methodology must create a breathing space for ideas to develop. Action research in general and self-study action research in particular does so by allowing the researcher the opportunity to identify their concerns. Action research as a methodological approach supports my ontological view of myself as in dynamic relation with the people who share the world in which I live. Action research has particular characteristics, which make it relevant and accessible to the educational practitioner working in the classroom.

Action research as a methodology is characterised by action, reflection on the action and the learning that emerges. The teacher is acknowledged as the expert as they account for their own practice. It is collaborative in that all practitioners are involved in improvement of practice, and the methodology is personalised and based on a process view, which means that it is not necessarily an end product (Browning and Myers, 1998). As practitioners develop an understanding of their practice more questions arise and this leads to further enquiry and reflection. "Teaching becomes an enquiry in action in which the teacher constantly endeavours critically to evaluate and improve the process of education for herself and for the people in her care (McNiff, 1993, p. 20).

In action research, practitioner-researchers initiate their own actions, identifying their own problems or areas that need attention. They are then involved in reflection on their data collection and processes of change. "For the action researcher, the end is the improvement of practice" (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 235). My own action research has involved what Brew (2001) has called "critically reflective research". Her ideal of a move away from positivist approaches as at the forefront of research practices, to an approach where teaching and research are compatible is one that underpins my choice of action research as a methodology. I want to develop as an "extended professional" (Hoyle, 1986) with "the capacity for autonomous professional self-development through systematic self-study..." (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 224). Stenhouse goes on to discuss the psychological barriers to teachers researching their own practice. I do not feel threatened by this examination of what I do because I work with a supportive group of co-researcher colleagues who are all doing the same type of research. One group of colleagues in particular have successfully completed their Masters in Education programme of studies, and opportunities to engage in dialogue with them have been invaluable in helping me extend my thinking and capacity for critical reflection on my own professional learning. My involvement in action research allows me to do this as I seek to improve my own educational practice and create new knowledge, which will be validated through my critical evaluation of my practice, as well as by the stringent evaluation of my emergent claims to knowledge by critical peer professionals.

I understand that self-study action research has certain qualities and can take as its starting point my experience of myself as a living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989). The research process involves action reflection cycles and my values transform into explanatory

principles of my educational influence in my own and others' learning (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006). I ask whether I have shown how my values underpin and explain my actions. It uses procedures of personal and social validation (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009) to test the validity of my knowledge claims, against identified standards of judgement linked to my values. As I did in my Masters dissertation (Renowden, 2006) I ask my readers to validate my claim to knowledge by checking whether I have produced sufficient evidence of the demonstration of these values being lived out in my practice. I also use Habermas's (1976) criteria for social validation asking whether I have presented an account that is comprehensible and truthful, and demonstrates authenticity and an awareness of the normative background to the research.

What is my practice?

In this section I outline the kinds of reflections and developing insights that have led me to take purposeful action to improve my practice. A starting point was to engage with the question, "What is my practice?" Through this critical questioning I have come to the following insights.

I have come to appreciate that the word *practice* is complex. MacIntyre (1981) suggests a definition of practice as follows.

By a "practice" I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity with the result that human powers to achieve excellence and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 175)

On reflection I now understand that the activities that make up my practice are many. I teach, which, as discussed, is a complex process. I am a co-ordinator, marker, link tutor and participant in meetings. All these activities demand a variety of skills to accomplish them competently. They are *coherent* inasmuch as they are set out in my job description and a timetable forms around them. I would agree with Dunne et al (2005) that the activities are evolving all the time, and they grow and develop the longer I spend with and more adequately understand them. I have also come to appreciate that the part of my practice that has been particularly problematic for me has been the teaching and learning interactions I was having, or rather not having, with those I was actively seeking to involve in the process, the students.

I value teaching as a relational activity that engages the learner as well as the teacher. Throughout my teaching career I have considered myself to be an educator, not a trainer, as often expressed in the professional education literatures and I have come to the realisation through dialogue with my colleagues in the MA study group that this desire to educate in my practice has always been an important value underpinning my work and that the negation of this was what was causing me unease.

I acknowledge the many different understandings of the term *education*. My understanding of education is that, amongst other things, it is a process that involves the personal engagement of the individual. As an educator it has been important to me that I develop and encourage learners who see educational processes as active rather than passive. I hold the view that my values influence the way I teach and interact with the learners in my classes. On this basis I agree with Pollard that “our perspectives and viewpoints influence what we do both inside and outside the classroom” (Pollard, 1997, p. 69). Brophy (1998) says effective teachers promote discourse around powerful ideas. They question and give feedback. As an educator I consider there to be a need for the student teacher to be able to observe not just behaviours but to problematise, interrogate, analyse and synthesise their experiences of what they see. As an educator, I aim to encourage the students away from the *what* of the role to the *why*, from a set of behaviours to a formulation of principles. I support them as they move from descriptions of their practice to explanations for what they are doing. The encouragement to make this move from observation to explanation and then to incorporate those principles into their own practice is at the heart of the work I do. I agree with McCann and Radford that the class teacher as educator “holds systematic conversations about the action of teaching and shared experiences of understandings about the intellectual act of teaching and for the enhancement and improvement of teachers” (McCann and Radford, 1993, p. 29).

This enables the student to consider and analyse why they do what they do, so that their practices can then be better transferred to another classroom, school or learning scenario, which perhaps engage with different practices. This desire to influence the development of a particular kind of transformational learning was not previously being lived out in my day-to-day practice, prior to my undertaking my action enquiry.

I want to be judged as an educator who brings understanding and depth to teaching and learning processes and invites others to share in the generation of knowledge through dialogue (Freire, 1972). I would see education as of value in itself, not as a process that produces something. It is for its own sake, an end in itself (Dewey, 1916). These values were being negated in my practice.

These were the kinds of understandings that developed through my critical reflections on my practice. I now outline what actions I took as a result.

What do I do about it?

Throughout my teaching I had been used to taking action to try to improve situations but what I had not done to any great extent was reflect on the influence of the action in terms of my own learning about my practice. I asked questions such as “Have the children learnt?” or “Was that successful in terms of classroom management?” I had not asked what I had come to understand about my own learning. I was focused on the others in the educational relationships without ever acknowledging the place of “I” in the process. I came to realise, after time spent with my students, that this was often the case with them too. In fact, the way I was teaching them in large groups and indeed the nature of initial teacher education itself shifted the focus away from them onto the schools and children they would be engaged with. The *way to teach* became a body of propositional knowledge external to

the researcher, to be looked at and accessed as quickly as possible to ensure success. I was teaching in a way that re-enforced that understanding and modelled education as the transmission of propositional knowledge. As I became critically aware of my own practices in the lecture hall I realised that I needed to understand my values and interrogate the nature of my practice to improve the situation. The focus had to be on my learning in and through my actions and my reflections on that learning.

As I began to reconsider my research focus I realised that a methodological approach was evolving from my questioning. As I was offering public descriptions and explanations of my own practice, I was developing my living theories of practice (Whitehead, 1989). My practice was becoming a form of theory generation. My action enquiry was becoming a form of self-study as I sought to understand my own learning in and from my actions. I would be offering living educational theories from my practice that would be based on an exploration of the transformational relationship between my ontological and epistemological values. These living theories would emerge from my actions as I reflected on what I had done. The MA dissertation I successfully completed is evidence of this as I believe this quotation demonstrates.

In asking the question “How do I improve my practice as I prepare students for teaching?” I am accountable for the production of evidence in support of my claim to knowledge. My claim to knowledge is that I know and understand my practice and educational development and know how to begin to improve it. I have learnt something new about practice and my own learning. In writing an account of my practice and the values that inform it and asking the question “How do I improve it?” I am generating a living educational theory of professional practice (Whitehead, 1989). (Renowden, 2006, p. 62)

This emergence of a research methodology came from the deepening understanding I was developing of my values. As I became aware of experiencing myself as a living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989), I began to explore why this was the case. Many of the students were happy to come to my sessions and receive the information in a format they did not have to engage with. Preparation of power-point slides was relatively easy and I did not find it too difficult to hand over the information. However, increasingly it became important to me that I demonstrated my own understandings through my actions as demonstrated in a presentation given at a St Mary’s University College seminar ([Video 2](#), Renowden, 2006)

This process became the methodology and the methodology became the process (Mellor, 1998). I was becoming a living participant in my own knowledge creation process, which was what I hoped to encourage my students to do. I was beginning to understand why I was experiencing myself as a living contradiction and what I could do about the situation.

Conclusion

The completion of my MA programme did not feel like the end of the process; in fact, it felt like the beginning. And so my research continues as I seek to transform my practice and understand the educational nature of my influence in my own learning and the learning of the others I work alongside. It has become an act of accountability. This research is continuing today and it has developed into my current doctoral study, which is exploring my practice in terms of inclusion and accountability (Renowden, 2007).

My claim to knowledge is that I know and understand my practice and educational development, and I know how to improve it. I claim that I am therefore developing an epistemology of accountability as I come to say what I know and how I come to know what I do about my own acts of accountability. I have learnt and am learning something new about practice and my own learning. In writing an account of my practice and the values that inform it, and by asking the question “How do I improve it?” I believe I am generating a living educational theory of professional practice (Whitehead, 1989). I am developing an epistemology of accountability.

Throughout this work I have become more confident professionally and this has been developed because I have been able to draw on my more informed judgements. I have become empowered as a professional educator and this has allowed me to take more control of my working life. I feel myself to be a participant in a change situation rather than an observer. Personally it has also been a positive experience. I have experienced the growth in my self-esteem that comes from the success of work undertaken. I have deepened the collaborative working relationships I value, and my understanding of the needs of my students is developing through my work. I believe I have, all in all, become a better practitioner.

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